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C O N F I D E N T I A L MUSCAT 001993

SIPDIS

NEA, NEA/ARP, INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: BIO: DR. SHARIFA AL-YAHYAI, MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REF: MUSCAT 01991

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (b, d).

1. (SBU) Reftel reported on the Ambassador's November 7 meeting with Dr. Sharifa bint Khalfan bin Nasser al-Yahyai, the newly appointed Minister of Social Development. This cable provides additional biographic information.

WHY HER?

2. (U) Dr. Sharifa al-Yahyai, a former Arabic literature professor at Sultan Qaboos University, was appointed Minister of Social Development October 20, 2004. She described her keen interest in women's issues and the progressive vision of Sultan Qaboos as the most probable factors contributing to her surprise appointment. While in her new post, she admitted having to ask a lot of questions and spending many late nights in the office just getting to understand the basics.

BACKGROUND

3. (SBU) Dr. Sharifa hails from Barka, about 70 km. west of Muscat on the Batinah coast. At 34 (she was born in 1970, the year Qaboos came to power), Dr. Sharifa is one of the youngest ministers in the cabinet. She is married to Abdullah al-Kindi, Deputy Dean of Student Affairs at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and has two children, Azzan (four) and Shareem (two and a half). Her brother Mohammed (a press freedom activist) currently lives in Alexandria, VA and works for the USG-funded "Al-Hurra" Arabic satellite TV channel. Dr. Sharifa has never been to the United States but has had at one trip to Washington and Florida postponed within the past year. She spoke fondly of her time at Leeds University in the U.K. and her visit there last summer with her children.

5. (SBU) Prior to her appointment, Dr. Sharifa worked for two years at SQU teaching Arabic poetry. In addition to her successful academic career, Dr. Sharifa has also been published. Her works include articles on women in Omani folk tales (published in Saudi Arabia), women in poetry, and images of Omani women in Arabic literature.

HIGHLIGHTS

-- 2004 Appointed Minister of Social Development
-- 2004 Led a 32 female student delegation from SQU to Malaysia & Singapore
-- 2002 Associate Professor of Arabic at SQU
-- 2001 Ph.D. from Leeds University in the United Kingdom
 "The early beginnings of the prose poem in the Gulf States"
Ph.D. dissertation project
-- 1995 Master of Arts from SQU
-- 1992 Bachelor of Arts from SQU

6. (C) In conversations with friends, colleagues, and former students of Dr. Sharifa, she has been described as hard-working and very bright. While even her friends were surprised at her appointment, all agree that Dr. Sharifa is quite intelligent. She appears to lack the conventional practical skills of Ministry work, but she is highly educated and boasts a passion for women's issues and their development in Omani society. Dr. Sharifa spoke often of women's role as mother and wife, and stressed the importance of further research and writing to foster understanding of the important roles women play in society's development.

7. (C) Dr. Sharifa met the Ambassador alone, with no assistant present. She outwardly appears quite modest, donning the traditional abaya and headcovering, with an apparent affinity for pink lace. Dr. Sharifa's English was impeccable as she spoke nostalgically of her time at Leeds and even at SQU before her surprise appointment at the

Ministry. While she admitted to finding it difficult adjusting to the rigorous demands of the Ministry as opposed to those of academia, she did appear confident that she will rise to the challenge to "serve the people."

BALTIMORE